Review

The emergence of the modern-day Bhāṣyakāras in the discourse of modern Indian Philosophy

Nilambar Chakrabarti[1]

[1] PhD Research Scholar, Jadavpur University, Sylff Fellowship Recipient, Former Research Fellow in South Asian Studies, Smith College.

Check for updates

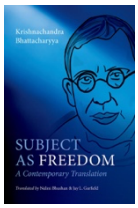
Edited By: Amritanath Bhattacharya

Citation: Chakrabarti, Nilambar. " The emergence of the modern-day Bhāṣyakāras in the discourse of modern Indian Philosophy" Poorvam International Journal of Creative Arts and Cultural Expressions, vol. 2, no. 1, June. 2026, pp. 181-186, Doi: 10.63752/pijcace.0201S09

Copyright:

© 2026 Nilambar Chakrabarti. Published by Dhvani Publication in Poorvam International Journal of Creative Arts and Cultural Expressions. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0), which permits unrestricted non-commercial use and distribution, provided the original work is properly cited and no derivatives are made.

Subject As Freedom: A Contemporary Translation
Krishnachandra Bhattacharyya,
Translated by Nalini Bhushan, and Jay L. Garfield
Oxford University Press, Ed I, 2026.
ISBN 978-0197852835



The Subject as Freedom holds a unique and distinguished place in modern Indian philosophy. Broadly acknowledged as Krishnachandra Bhattacharyya's magnum opus, the book represents one of the most original and philosophically sophisticated attempts to rethink the nature of subjectivity, freedom, and self-consciousness in twentieth-century Indian philosophy. Despite providing a highly valuable framework for understanding subjectivity, self-consciousness, and freedom, the book has earned a reputation as one of the least accessible texts in modern Indian philosophy because of its dense arguments, difficult prose, and highly technical vocabulary. Even seasoned readers of Indian philosophy may feel intimidated while engaging with the text. It is precisely in this context that Nalini Bhushan and Jay Garfield's edition appears — one that not only translates the text but also bridges the conceptual distance between Bhattacharyya's philosophical worldview and contemporary readers.

It is tempting to describe the volume simply as a new translation of a difficult classic. Such a description, however, would seriously underestimate its achievement. The volume is

simultaneously a translation, a philosophical commentary, an intellectual biography of a text, and an interpretive intervention into the reception of Bhattacharyya. Indeed, one of its greatest virtues is that it refuses to separate these tasks. Translation here is itself understood as philosophical work.

This point deserves emphasis because the editors consciously reject the fiction of interpretive neutrality. Every philosophical translation presupposes an understanding of the text translated. Rather than concealing their interpretive commitments beneath the appearance of literal fidelity, Garfield and Bhushan make those commitments explicit. Their extensive introductory essay argues that Subject as Freedom should be read within the broader trajectory of Bhattacharyya's engagement with Advaita Vedānta, particularly through the illuminating "bookends" provided by "Śaṅkara's Doctrine of Māyā" (1925) and "The Advaita and Its Spiritual Significance" (1936). The introduction is therefore not merely preparatory; it provides the conceptual architecture within which the translation itself is to be understood.

This feature distinguishes the present edition from many contemporary philosophical translations. Instead of presenting Bhattacharyya as an isolated historical thinker, Garfield and Bhushan have reconstructed the intellectual movement of his philosophy. Their concern is not merely what Bhattacharyya says but how he arrives at it. Consequently, readers are introduced not only to his terminology but also to his philosophical method, his dialectical strategy, and the wider constellation of debates within which his reflections on subjectivity and freedom acquire their significance.

It is here that the present reviewer would like to propose an alternative way of understanding the editors' contribution. Garfield and Bhushan are perhaps best regarded not simply as translators but as contemporary bhāṣyakāras of Bhattacharyya. Within the classical Indian philosophical tradition, a bhāṣya is never a mere explanatory supplement to an original text. A commentator reconstructs arguments, clarifies conceptual

transitions, identifies implicit presuppositions, responds to possible objections, and above all initiates the reader into a particular philosophical vision. The commentator is therefore not secondary to philosophy but an active participant in its continuation.

Seen from this perspective, Garfield and Bhushan's introduction resembles a classical bhāṣya more than a modern editorial preface. They neither simplify Bhattacharyya's arguments nor attempt to domesticate them within familiar Western philosophical categories. Instead, they preserve the conceptual demands of the original while providing readers with the hermeneutical resources necessary to inhabit Bhattacharyya's mode of philosophising. Their work thus performs precisely the function traditionally expected of a philosophical commentator: not making a difficult philosopher easy, but making him genuinely readable. This becomes particularly evident in the editorial philosophy governing the translation itself. Rather than mechanically reproducing Bhattacharyya's terminology, the editors repeatedly explain the philosophical motivations behind their lexical decisions. For instance, they render Bhattacharyya's "object" as "intentional object," clarifying that he is concerned not with physical objects as such but with objects of reference or discourse. Likewise, "meaning" is translated as "reference" in contexts where Bhattacharyya is clearly concerned with referential rather than semantic function, and these choices are carefully justified through explanatory notes. Such interventions exemplify an editorial philosophy that prioritises conceptual fidelity over lexical literalism.

This approach deserves considerable praise. Many translations of philosophical texts oscillate between two unsatisfactory extremes: excessive literalism that renders the original unintelligible, or excessive domestication that silently replaces the author's conceptual vocabulary with the translator's. Garfield and Bhushan avoid both dangers. Their translation remains remarkably faithful to Bhattacharyya's philosophical intentions while simultaneously rendering the text accessible to readers unfamiliar with the peculiarities of his style. The result

is an edition that neither betrays the complexity of the original nor mistakes obscurity for philosophical depth.

The intellectual heart of the volume is undoubtedly the eighty-page introductory essay. Equally noteworthy is the manner in which the introduction bridges classical Indian philosophy and contemporary philosophical discourse. Their comparisons with Kant and Husserl are offered as heuristic aids rather than claims of direct influence, which keeps the cross-traditional reading honest. Garfield and Bhushan argue with considerable confidence that Advaita Vedānta provides the principal interpretive key to Subject as Freedom. Their reading is sophisticated and supported by impressive textual scholarship. Their treatment of the distinction between the real and the true is a case in point: Bhattacharyya's analysis of illusion is shown to be neither a purely epistemological exercise nor a metaphysical aside, but part of a larger movement toward freedom. Nevertheless, one may wonder whether the very success of this interpretive framework occasionally limits the philosophical openness of Bhattacharyya's text.

Bhattacharyya's analyses of subjectivity, freedom, alternation, and self-consciousness frequently proceed through phenomenological description rather than scriptural exegesis or metaphysical assertion. The originality of Subject as Freedom lies precisely in this methodological independence. Although Advaita undoubtedly forms an indispensable background, Bhattacharyya often appears less concerned with defending an established philosophical school than with reconstructing the very conditions under which philosophical reflection becomes possible.

This raises an important hermeneutical question. Does reading Subject as Freedom primarily through the lens of Advaita illuminate the text, or does it risk determining in advance what readers are expected to find? The "bookend" strategy undoubtedly provides valuable context, yet it can also create the impression that the meaning of the 1930 work is already settled by texts written before and after it. Such an approach may

unintentionally diminish the autonomy of Subject as Freedom as a philosophical work capable of generating interpretations that exceed the doctrinal commitments of its author.

This concern becomes particularly significant because Bhattacharyya consciously develops a vocabulary that frequently departs from traditional Advaitic terminology. Expressions such as "alternation," "objective freedom," "spiritual freedom," and the intricate analyses of subjectivity possess a conceptual texture that is uniquely his own. They invite comparison not only with Advaita but also with phenomenology, transcendental philosophy, and contemporary discussions of selfhood. While Garfield and Bhushan acknowledge many of these connections, the gravitational pull of Advaita remains so strong throughout the introduction that alternative philosophical possibilities occasionally recede into the background.

This is not fatal to the editors' reading, but it does mean the introduction is best approached as a strong argument for one way of reading Bhattacharyya, not as a settled account of what the text is. Strong interpretations invariably provoke disagreement, and Garfield and Bhushan deserve considerable credit for resisting the safe neutrality that characterizes much editorial scholarship. Their introduction does not merely accompany Bhattacharyya's text; it enters into dialogue with it. That dialogue, even where one is inclined to dissent, constitutes one of the volume's greatest intellectual achievements.

The parallel presentation of Bhattacharyya's original text and the modern translation is especially commendable. Readers are afforded the opportunity to appreciate the extraordinary density of the original prose while simultaneously observing the editors' interpretive decisions. This editorial transparency is pedagogically invaluable. Rather than concealing the inevitable difficulties of philosophical translation, the volume invites readers to reflect upon them.

Equally impressive is the extensive editorial apparatus accompanying the translation. The explanatory notes are never merely lexical glosses; they frequently reconstruct the conceptual motivations underlying Bhattacharyya's terminology. For instance, the editors' discussions of intentionality, reference, universals, and first-person discourse clarify why seemingly modest terminological decisions carry substantial philosophical consequences. The notes function less as explanatory annotations than as miniature philosophical essays, allowing readers to follow not only Bhattacharyya's reasoning but also the translators' interpretive deliberations. Such editorial care significantly enhances the scholarly value of the edition.

In the final analysis, this volume deserves to be regarded as the standard English point of entry into Subject as Freedom. It combines careful translation, sophisticated philosophical commentary, and substantial editorial scholarship, and it demonstrates the continuing vitality of Bhattacharyya's thought whether one approaches him from Advaita Vedānta, phenomenology, transcendental philosophy, philosophy of language, or comparative philosophy. More importantly, it restores Krishnachandra Bhattacharyya to the centre of philosophical discussion—not as an historical curiosity or merely as a representative of Advaita Vedānta, but as a philosopher whose reflections on subjectivity and freedom continue to challenge and enrich contemporary thought.

Garfield and Bhushan have therefore accomplished considerably more than the production of a reliable translation. They have recovered a philosophical voice that had become increasingly difficult to hear beneath the weight of its own textual complexity. If future generations of scholars come to read Bhattacharyya with greater philosophical confidence and greater interpretive sensitivity, this edition will undoubtedly be remembered as the work that made such a revival possible.